

DISCIPLINARY SPECIFICITY IN ACADEMIC WRITING: IMPLICATIONS FOR ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES INSTRUCTION

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Abstract. *We examine the specificity of academic writing genres, focusing on university-level assignments in Physics and English. Through an analysis of genre conventions and expectations, this study investigates how assignment types, structural formats, and language use align with distinct epistemological frameworks in each discipline. In Physics, writing genres such as lab reports and research proposals prioritize precision, objectivity, and empirical rigor. Conversely, English assignments, including analytical essays and reflective discourses, emphasize argumentative structure, critical interpretation, and expressive language. These findings highlight the importance of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs in providing both discipline-specific instruction and foundational skills. By addressing the unique and shared aspects of disciplinary writing, this paper offers insights for EAP curriculum design, promoting a balance between specialized training and adaptable competencies to support students across academic fields.*

Key words: *disciplinary specificity, English for Academic Purposes (EAP), genre analysis, academic writing instruction*

1. INTRODUCTION

In higher education, the writing tasks of students are often closely aligned with their academic disciplines (Coffin 2003; Nesi & Gardner 2012; Wingate 2015). Chemists typically produce laboratory reports, computer scientists write program manuals, and English majors focus on essays, reflecting the varied academic pursuits and distinct methodologies, conventions, and communication needs of each field (Swales & Feak 2021; Bruce 2020). Though disciplinary boundaries may sometimes blur, analyzing writing demands by discipline provides critical insights into academic literacy. Examining the typical text types or genres required in each discipline allows educators and researchers to understand the linguistic, rhetorical, and argumentative conventions that shape scholarly discourse (Flowerdew & Costley 2017). Addressing these unique writing requirements is crucial for developing effective literacy instruction and curriculum design in higher education.

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According to Hyland (Hyland 2021), academic discourse consists of multiple subject-specific literacies, each with distinct perspectives on knowledge, research practices, and worldviews. This distinction underscores the importance of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which tailors instructions to the needs of professional communities with unique practices, genres, and conventions. Yet students often cross disciplinary boundaries, requiring a broad skill set to effectively navigate diverse academic and social environments (Lillis & Tuck 2016). Recognizing these specific literacy practices is essential for students, as it highlights that literacy is relative to the beliefs and practices of social groups.

The principle of specificity in ESP further emphasizes that language use is context-dependent, and general labels like "academic English" or "scientific English" can oversimplify the complexity within disciplines (Charles, Pecorari, & Hunston 2009). A uniform approach to academic literacy risks misleading educators to believe they must adhere to a single set of rules across all fields, potentially overlooking their existing literary practices and misattributing communication difficulties. Through the exploration of this study, we seek to illuminate the nuanced interplay between disciplinary identities and writing practices, providing insights crucial for developing targeted literacy instruction and curriculum design.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Analysis of disciplinary clusters and suggested revisions

In their influential work, *Teaching Academic Writing: A Toolkit for Higher Education*, Coffin et al. (Coffin 2003) classify academic disciplines and outline typical written genres associated with each in Table C1.1, dividing fields into Sciences, Social Sciences, Humanities/Arts, and Applied Disciplines (see Figure 1). Within this framework, Sciences include disciplines such as physics, chemistry, biology, and geology; Social Sciences cover fields like sociology, geography, economics, and politics; Humanities/Arts encompasses English, history, languages, classics, fine art, philosophy, and music, and Applied Disciplines feature areas like business, management, engineering, health studies, psychology, nursing, and social welfare. Each grouping represents distinct areas of study, methodologies, theories, and practices: Sciences generally follow empirical and quantitative methods; Humanities lean toward interpretative and qualitative approaches; Social Sciences utilize both qualitative and quantitative approaches; and Applied Disciplines integrate practical applications with theoretical foundations from other clusters. This framework has provided educators with a comprehensive guide for teaching academic writing at the university level, emphasizing discipline-specific writing requirements to meet the varied needs of students. Coffin et al. suggest that writing tasks can be categorized into these four main disciplinary categories, each reflecting similarities and differences in approach. This categorization aids in tailoring writing instruction to meet the needs of students across fields, focusing on the unique requirements of each discipline and promoting discipline-specific literacies. These categories also align with traditional disciplinary distinctions, which reflect varied epistemological foundations and methodological approaches essential for effective academic writing instruction.

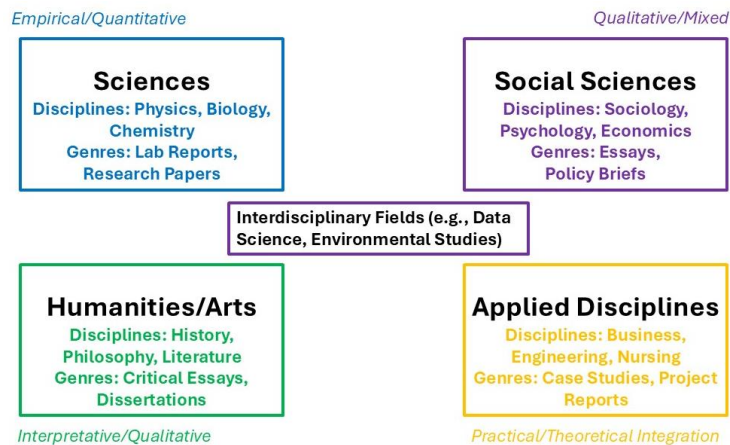


Fig. 1 Disciplinary clusters and writing genres framework

Coffin et al. likely used several principles to develop these clusters. First, disciplines in each category are grouped by shared subject matter, with Social Sciences, for instance, focusing on human behavior and societal structures, while Sciences such as physics and biology concentrate on natural phenomena. Humanities/Arts, including English and History, emphasize language, literature, and historical analysis. Methodologically, these distinctions represent research methods unique to each cluster: Sciences rely on quantitative and empirical methods, while Humanities engage in qualitative analysis and textual interpretation. Coffin et al. further differentiate clusters by their epistemology — how knowledge is constructed and validated — such as the reliance on empirical evidence and experimentation in the Sciences versus the interpretative focus in the Humanities. Additionally, interdisciplinary connections emerge, especially in Applied Disciplines, which bridge fields by integrating methodologies and theories from multiple areas; engineering, for example, often draws from both Sciences and Social Sciences. Another distinguishing factor is the purpose and application of each discipline, with theoretical disciplines aimed at knowledge development and Applied Disciplines focused on real-world applications. Writing genres and conventions specific to each field, such as lab reports in Sciences, literature reviews in Humanities, or case studies in Applied Disciplines, further shape how arguments are structured, evidence is presented, and sources are cited. Finally, the purpose and intended audience — whether academic peers, practitioners, or the general public — also influence writing across fields. Through these principles, Coffin et al. provide a framework that helps educators effectively categorize and tailor academic writing instruction to meet the distinct needs of various disciplines. Recent studies continue to explore the role of genre-specific conventions in academic writing, emphasizing the necessity of aligning EAP instruction with disciplinary needs. For instance, Hyland & Jiang (Hyland & Jiang 2021) highlight the value of genre pedagogies that adapt to the specialized requirements of each discipline, offering targeted strategies that meet the specific demands of academic discourse within diverse fields.

While Coffin et al.'s groupings provide valuable insights into academic disciplines and their distinct characteristics, a few adjustments could make this framework more representative of contemporary practices and the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of many fields. Some potential modifications could include creating a new category for

interdisciplinary studies. This would acknowledge fields that integrate methods and insights across traditional clusters, such as Environmental Studies, which combines elements from the Sciences, Social Sciences, and Humanities. Recognizing this as a distinct interdisciplinary field would better capture the collaborative and cross-disciplinary approaches essential in modern research. Emerging disciplines, like Data Science and Digital Humanities, should also be considered (Edwards 2021). These fields embody the merging of traditional academic domains with advanced technological methods, demonstrating the evolving landscape of academic enquiry. Data Science, for example, combines aspects of Computer Science, Statistics, and applied disciplines, while Digital Humanities integrates conventional humanistic study with digital tools, reflecting the dynamic development in these areas (Gold & Klein 2016; Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier 2017). In the Humanities cluster, existing fields such as English, History, Philosophy, and Cultural Studies could be expanded to include Digital Humanities, recognizing the trend of incorporating digital methodologies into humanistic study, which has become increasingly relevant in academia (Burdick 2012). Similarly, within the Social Sciences, disciplines like Sociology, Psychology, Political Science, and Economics could be broadened to include fields such as Communication Studies and Criminology, acknowledging their shared focus on societal structures, human behavior and interdisciplinary overlaps (Machin & Mayr 2012; Loader 2010). Within the Natural Sciences and Engineering Cluster, existing fields such as Biology, Chemistry, Physics, and Engineering might benefit from the addition of Environmental Science and Computer Science (Kitchin, 2014). Environmental Science, with its multidisciplinary scope, addresses contemporary scientific challenges, while Computer Science, often seen as a distinct discipline, aligns with both empirical scientific research and applied problem-solving in engineering. In the Professional and Applied Sciences Cluster, existing disciplines like Business, Law, Medicine, and Education could be supplemented with fields such as Public Health and Social Work. These fields share a practical focus on solving real-world issues and are highly interdisciplinary, integrating research and practice from multiple fields to address societal needs (Graham & Tetroe 2019). Incorporating these changes would create a more accurate and comprehensive framework, reflecting the complexity and evolving nature of academic disciplines. This revised categorization would capture the diversity of academic writing and scholarship more effectively, helping educators better understand the specific demands of each field. Moreover, while the genres Coffin et al. associate with each discipline generally align well with their respective categories, a few adjustments in these typical genres might improve the accuracy and relevance of the framework.

2.2. Alignment of genres with disciplinary categories

In the Sciences, genres like laboratory reports, project proposals, and fieldwork notes align with the empirical and experimental focus of disciplines such as Biology, Chemistry, and Physics, as highlighted in disciplinary writing research (Bazerman 2008). Other genres, including review articles and meta-analyses, have become essential for synthesizing research and analyzing data across studies (Gurevitch 2018). The increasing requirement for data management plans underscores the importance of systematic data organization in scientific work (Michener 2015). Additionally, software documentation has grown in relevance, especially in Computer Science and Engineering, as it reflects the expanding role of technology in scientific inquiry (Gentzkow 2017). However, fieldwork notes may be more fitting within Applied Disciplines, where practical applications are emphasized.

In the Social Sciences, genres like essays, reports, and project proposals mirror the combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies found in fields such as Sociology, Psychology, and Political Science (Prior 2019). Ethnographies, significant in Anthropology and Sociology, offer in-depth descriptions of human behavior and cultural practices (Emerson 2011). Survey reports, commonly used in Psychology and Sociology for empirical studies, and policy briefs, critical in fields focusing on public policy and governance, align with the applied nature of these disciplines (Petticrew & Roberts 2006). While project proposals are widespread, they may align better with Applied Disciplines, where practical applications are central (Flowerdew 2000).

Humanities/Arts disciplines frequently employ genres like critical essays, translations, and dissertations, which support the interpretative and analytical approaches typical in English, History, Philosophy, and Cultural Studies (Geisler 2013; Fitzpatrick 2011). Recently, digital projects have grown in prominence due to the rise of Digital Humanities, blending traditional humanistic inquiry with digital methodologies (Burdick 2012). Creative writing, particularly relevant in English and Creative Writing programs, fosters narrative exploration and development (Bartholomae 2005). While translations remain relevant, they may not be as universally essential as essays and theoretical papers.

In Applied Disciplines such as Business, Law, Medicine, and Education, genres like case studies, project reports, fieldwork notes, and dissertations cater to the practical and professional orientation of these fields, supporting the development of industry-specific knowledge and problem-solving skills (Gibbs 2018; Hutchings 2001). Grant proposals are essential in fields such as Public Health and Medical Research, providing financial support for practical applications (Ravitch & Riggan 2017). Strategic plans, applicable in Business and Public Administration, offer structured pathways for organizational growth (Bryson 2018). Professional practice reports, underscoring practical applications, are vital in areas like Social Work and Education. Although dissertations are common here, they may be better categorized under discipline-specific tasks in the Sciences or Social Sciences, where theoretical contributions are central (Lave & Wenger 1991).

To keep these genre categorizations relevant, periodic updates and continuous evaluations are essential. As academic disciplines evolve and interdisciplinary research increases, these lists must adapt to ensure they stay aligned with current academic and professional practices (Bazerman 2020).

2.3. Applications of Discipline and Genre Categorization for EAP Teachers

The categorization of disciplines and genres offers significant benefits to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers, enabling them to create more tailored and relevant instruction. By understanding the typical genres within each discipline, teachers can focus on specific writing and communication needs, such as essay writing and critical analysis in the Humanities, or lab reports and technical writing in the Natural Sciences (Hyland & Jiang 2021; Dressen-Hammouda 2019). This targeted approach ensures that students acquire skills directly relevant to their academic and career goals. Moreover, the integration of technology into ESP instruction has been shown to enhance the effectiveness of discipline-specific teaching methods. Tools such as course management systems, corpora, and wikis can facilitate the development of genre awareness and language skills pertinent to specific fields (Dashtestani 2016).

Through genre categorization, EAP teachers can design curricula that include genre-specific assignments and activities aligned with students' professional aspirations. For instance, incorporating case study analysis for Social Sciences students or project report writing for Engineering students helps prepare them for practical, real-world demands (Basturkmen 2021; Zhang & Cheng 2022). Students are more likely to find their coursework engaging when they recognize its direct relevance to their fields; for example, business students may feel more motivated when they understand that learning to write professional reports can directly impact their career success.

Additionally, categorizing genres allows teachers to set clear expectations for quality writing within different disciplines, making academic writing less intimidating for students by providing examples and rubrics (Flowerdew 2017). Teachers can offer specific guidance for genres like lab reports or literature reviews, helping students grasp the standards for success in their fields. At the same time, this approach fosters transferable academic skills, such as critical thinking, argumentation, and synthesis, which are valuable across disciplines and help prepare students for interdisciplinary work (Ding & Bruce 2021). This method also addresses the diverse needs of students, particularly those in joint or interdisciplinary programs, by helping them navigate and integrate different writing conventions. Additionally, it supports the professional development of EAP teachers themselves, as they continue learning about evolving disciplinary practices and genres, often by attending workshops and seminars focused on the latest trends (Paltridge & Starfield 2019). Moreover, Charles et al. (Charles 2009) argue that EAP programs should address the inherent complexities of ESP by providing students with discipline-focused resources that acknowledge the diverse and nuanced language practices within each field. This approach not only reinforces the specific conventions of each genre but also supports students in navigating the multidisciplinary demands of contemporary academia. Discipline-specific EAP instruction has been shown to improve students' writing outcomes by aligning curricular content with the unique demands of each field. Studies like Basturkmen (Basturkmen 2021) underscore the value of focused, genre-based instruction, showing that students who engage with discipline-relevant writing tasks are better equipped to meet the expectations of their academic communities. Moreover, Paltridge & Starfield (Paltridge & Starfield 2019) suggest that such an approach not only improves students' genre awareness but also increases their engagement and sense of relevance within EAP programs.

In summary, categorizing disciplines and genres enables EAP teachers to develop a curriculum that is effective, relevant, and engaging, ultimately equipping students with the skills needed to meet the academic and professional challenges of their chosen fields.

3. METHODOLOGY

In this study, we conducted a small survey on the types of writing students are expected to produce in two graduate-level disciplines, each representing a different category from Coffin et al.'s framework: English Literature in the Humanities category and Physics in the Natural Sciences. We collected course descriptions and assignment details from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) website for two courses in each discipline: Physics (8.421 Atomic and Optical Physics I and 8.06 Quantum Physics III) and English (21L.451 Introduction to Literary Theory and 21L.005 Introduction to Drama).

In the Physics courses, 8.421 Atomic and Optical Physics I includes problem sets focused on atomic structure, quantum mechanics, and electromagnetic interactions, as well as a term paper modeled on a scientific journal article. This course builds students' scientific writing skills while introducing key concepts in atomic and optical physics. Similarly, 8.06 Quantum Physics III addresses advanced quantum mechanics topics, with assignments that include a research paper related to previous coursework and a final paper, each evaluated on intellectual content, presentation, and prose quality. Peer editing is incorporated into the writing process to encourage critical feedback and engagement with quantum physics concepts.

In the English courses, 21L.451 Introduction to Literary Theory involves varied assignments: response papers that allow brief engagement with readings, oral presentations on assigned texts, a take-home midterm consisting of short essays, and a final paper focused on theoretical or in-depth text analysis. This course introduces students to literary interpretation through modern theoretical paradigms, with an emphasis on poststructuralist approaches. Meanwhile, 21L.005 Introduction to Drama involves assignments such as analytical response papers on selected plays, a student-composed theatrical scene, a major paper, a final exam, and class participation that includes leading discussions and performing scenes. This course explores drama as an art form, combining storytelling and live performance to examine dramatic structures and social themes.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected from these courses provide insights into the genre expectations and writing skills emphasized across different disciplinary clusters at the graduate level. The variety of assignments in both Physics and English highlights the distinct epistemological and methodological approaches in each field, underscoring the importance of discipline-specific writing instruction.

The assignments encapsulate the essence of the courses and their academic goals, highlighting the focus on research, writing, and critical analysis in both physics and literature. In Physics, writing assignments primarily focus on empirical documentation, such as lab reports and research proposals. These tasks emphasize structured formats and precise, objective language to clearly communicate scientific findings and methodologies (Swales & Feak 2021). Conversely, in English, writing assignments prioritize critical analysis through analytical essays and personal reflection via reflective journals. Here, the emphasis is on developing a strong argumentative structure, conducting in-depth textual analysis, and using expressive language to convey complex ideas and personal insights effectively. Together, these approaches highlight the distinct yet complementary nature of writing in the sciences and humanities, each fostering specific skills relevant to their respective fields.

In evaluating the implications of the assignments described for disciplinary specificity, it is clear that both the Physics and English courses at MIT employ writing assignments that reflect discipline-specific genres, formats, and objectives, reinforcing the view that typical student genres are indeed tailored to each field (Lea & Street 2006; Nesi & Gardner 2012). For Physics courses, assignments like lab reports, technical problem sets, and research papers require a structured, objective format that emphasizes empirical accuracy, reproducibility, and concise reporting—hallmarks of scientific documentation. The Physics writing tasks focus on factual precision, adherence to scientific formats (e.g., using LaTeX for journal-like

submissions), and peer-editing practices. These elements underscore the emphasis of the field on clear, replicable communication, aimed at facilitating peer understanding and scholarly contribution (Swales & Feak 2021). Conversely, English courses assign genres such as analytical essays, reflective journals, and response papers that emphasize critical interpretation, argumentative structure, and personal reflection. The English assignments encourage expressive and interpretive language as students engage with theoretical paradigms or dramatic texts, emphasizing the subjective and rhetorical dimensions of textual analysis. These genres cultivate skills where clarity and persuasive argumentation are valued alongside individual expression (Lea & Street 2006).

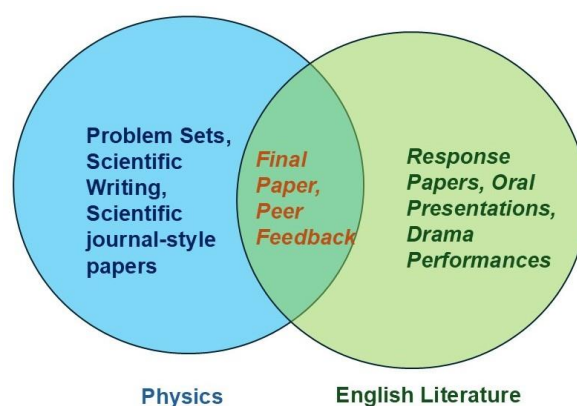


Figure 2 Comparison of Assignment Types in Physics and English Courses

However, there are also some generalizable features across fields (see Figure 2). Both disciplines prioritize structured formats, critical thinking, and peer feedback mechanisms, albeit with differing emphases and purposes. For example, in both fields, peer feedback is integral: in Physics, it ensures clarity and precision, while in English, it refines argumentative and interpretive depth. This shared feature indicates that, while genres are discipline-specific, the practice of peer review and structured documentation can transcend disciplinary boundaries (Nesi & Gardner 2012).

In sum, the findings largely support the view that typical student writing genres are discipline-specific, tailored to meet field-specific standards of evidence, argumentation, and expression. However, the underlying skills of structured writing, peer review, and critical engagement highlight interdisciplinary practices that can enhance communication across academic fields (Swales & Feak 2021).

The conclusions about disciplinary specificity in academic writing suggest important directions for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teaching. Specifically, they emphasize the need for EAP programs to balance discipline-specific writing instruction with foundational skills that apply across fields. Given that each discipline has unique genres, formats, and language conventions, EAP instruction should focus on familiarizing students with these distinctions while equipping them with core academic skills that are transferable across disciplines (Wingate 2015). Research demonstrates that tailoring EAP instruction to the specific genres and writing conventions of each discipline significantly enhances students' academic performance and confidence in disciplinary contexts. For

example, Wingate (Wingate 2015) found that students in discipline-specific EAP courses showed greater proficiency in adhering to field-specific standards of writing, as compared to those in general academic writing programs. This targeted approach helps students internalize the rhetorical structures and language norms of their respective fields, facilitating more effective communication in academic and professional settings.

As an example, in EAP courses for science students, it would be beneficial to focus on teaching objective, precise language, structured report writing, and empirical reasoning (see Figure 3). Skills such as using field-specific formatting tools (like LaTeX in Physics), organizing quantitative data, and crafting concise descriptions of findings would directly support science students' academic needs. This targeted approach would help students grasp the unique requirements of scientific writing, such as clarity, structure, and reproducibility (Swales & Feak 2021). In contrast, EAP programs for humanities students could emphasize argumentative structuring, interpretative language, and critical analysis of texts, as well as writing for expressive and persuasive purposes. EAP teaching should focus on building skills in analytical essay writing, reflective journaling, and oral presentations, where subjectivity and nuance in language play essential roles. This would allow humanities students to engage more deeply with critical theory, textual analysis, and persuasive argumentation (Lea & Street 2006; Wingate 2015). Furthermore, the shared skills across disciplines, such as peer review, structured formatting, and critical thinking, indicate that EAP courses should include general academic writing practices alongside discipline-specific instruction. Integrating tasks like peer editing, abstract writing, and thesis structuring across EAP programs can provide students with a foundational skill set that will support their writing in multiple academic contexts. Emphasizing clarity of thought, structured argumentation, and awareness of audience will serve students well, regardless of their field of study (Nesi & Gardner 2012). In light of these insights, it is suggested that balancing genre-specific instruction with adaptable academic skills is crucial in preparing students for both specialized and interdisciplinary writing contexts. Such a balanced EAP curriculum can enhance students' ability to transition across disciplinary boundaries, fostering both depth and flexibility in academic literacy.

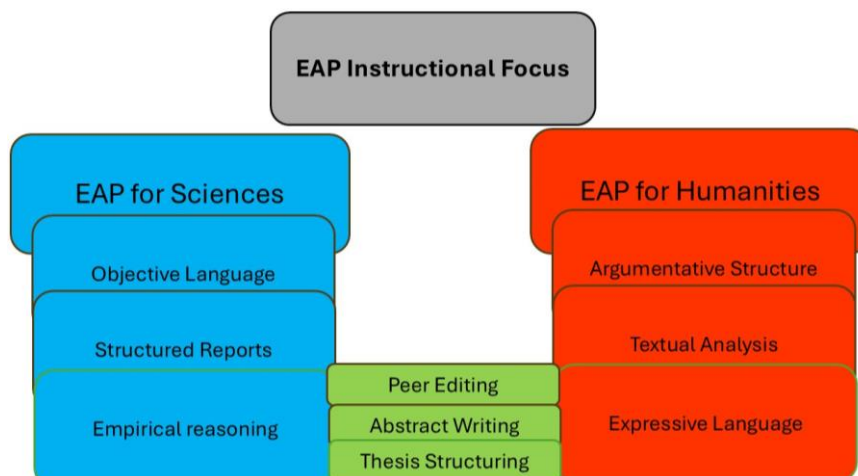


Fig. 3 Flowchart for EAP Instructional Focus by Discipline

5. CONCLUSIONS

In summary, it is implied that EAP teaching should balance specificity with adaptability. By offering students discipline-targeted writing instruction alongside general academic skills, EAP courses can better prepare students for the varied and nuanced demands of academic writing across disciplines. Incorporating discipline-specific writing instruction into EAP courses aligns with findings from multiple studies on the benefits of genre-focused pedagogy. Tailoring EAP curricula to reflect the genre conventions of different fields equips students with skills that enhance their academic success and adaptability, providing a solid foundation for both specialized and interdisciplinary work. By fostering genre awareness and discipline-relevant competencies, EAP programs can effectively bridge the gap between general language skills and field-specific academic literacy.

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